



Dispatches from The Earth Blog

Looking Back, Looking Forward

This is no swan song; no sad farewell. Maybe, though, it's time to pause a while and think back to what has been said. After more than 4 years writing a mixture of research articles, contrarian polemic, calls to arms and personal expressions of my search for something better, it is no surprise that the power of words sometimes needs reinforcing in its fragile, ephemeral state.

My friend Guy McPherson inspired this partial anthology of essays from The Earth Blog; his review of "greatest hits" on Nature Bats Last is dispassionate, letting the words speak for themselves. However, there is a proviso - the essays shown in this specially produced volume exist for a reason: writing on The Earth Blog is hard, often so hard that essays can take months from idea to publication. Each essay means something important, and the essays presented here I consider to be particularly important in reflecting the way I feel we must approach and tackle the problems inherent in the collapsing mess we were once proud to call Earth.

It is not an exhaustive set by any means; some important pieces, such as my interview with Carolyn Baker, and "100 Ways To Undermine The Industrial Machine" just don't fit, so the web sites (see below) and my book "Time's Up!" - which some of these essays are extensions of - remain the primary source of information.

The essays are unedited, unabridged, and often very intense. The order in which they are presented is in the form of a branching journey, culminating in the only piece of complete fiction published on The Earth Blog. If there is a stepping-off point where you can most surely take charge of your own destiny, then that is probably it.

Over the course of the years I have been fortunate to come into contact with some very imaginative, brilliant and life-affirming people: I do not want to name individuals for fear of missing someone out; but rest assured, their influence runs through the lines of these essays. Invention may be the domain of the individual, but change is the destiny only of those who are prepared to come together and make it happen.

*Keith Farnish
August 2010, Scotland.*

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www.theearthblog.org

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Anti-Greenwashing and Direct Action
www.unsuitablog.org

A Matter of Scale

Online version of "Time's Up!" the book, and a useful Reference Hub.
www.amatterofscale.com

A Simple Message for Humanity

Human activity is destroying the natural systems that we depend upon for our survival. Our most basic instinct as humans is to survive; yet we continue to destroy our life-support machine. Connected humans understand this terrible contradiction; disconnected humans are not able to.

Not all humans are responsible: just those who are part of Industrial Civilization. Industrial Civilization depends on economic growth and the unsustainable use of natural resources, so it has developed a complex set of tools for keeping people disconnected from the real world and living a life that keeps civilization running. Humans have been manipulated in order to be part of a destructive system.

The only way to prevent global ecological collapse and thus ensure the survival of humanity is to rid the world of Industrial Civilization.

Civilization is complex and delicate: it depends on everything running smoothly and also depends upon people having faith in its goodness. Global ecological systems are changing in unpredictable and major ways; natural resources are running out rapidly; the population is growing, particularly the population of urban areas; there is considerable political and civil unrest developing throughout the world: any combination of these factors are likely to lead to a sudden and catastrophic collapse of civilization during the 21st century.

It is possible to create a situation where civilization is left to crumble gradually, reducing the impact on humanity, and the sooner this is done, the less the global environment will be harmed. The key things we need to do are:

- 1) Reconnect with the real world, so that we can understand our close relationships with it in everything we do. The more you connect, the more you will realise how unreal civilization is.
- 2) Live in such a way that we do not contribute to the expansion of the global economy, reducing our impact on the natural environment in the process. Be aware that authority figures within the system, such as political leaders and corporations, will attempt to provide you with 'green' advice: this advice is designed to ensure that civilization continues, and should be ignored.
- 3) Create the conditions so that others may also change through education and, even more importantly, undermining the tools that civilization uses to keep us part of the machine. Don't waste time protesting: this changes nothing – that is why it is legal.

A future outside of civilization is a better life; one in which we can actually decide for ourselves how we are going to live.

The Logical Absurdity of Climate Change Denial

If someone doesn't want to believe something then what can you do to change their mind? Trust me, it's more difficult than you think: it isn't just the simple case of someone not believing something, the key word is "want" – if they don't want to believe then there is almost nothing you can do about it. Even if all the evidence is against them.

I see this all the time: on the TV news, in the printed media, on blogs and discussion boards, and in the streets; this constant battle between two entrenched positions – be it over religious idealism, abortion, vaccinations or anything else that invokes emotional involvement – is almost unbearable to witness. For the most part, this battle will grind on and on until the various parties give up trying to convince the other side, through lack of energy, lack of time, illness and even death. People have died for their beliefs, in their millions – but there are always others to take their place.

The battle between the two sides over climate change, or anthropogenic global warming (AGW), won't be ending any time soon; and there will be blood, mark my words. This is more than a battle for intellectual superiority – it is battle over an idealistic principle, and that principle is...actually, let's come back to that. First of all, given the title of this essay, I think we need to consider the words "denial" and "denier".

Put simply, denial is an unwillingness to accept a position: I deny that white people are racially superior to black people, which to most of us is a reasonable position to take. The opposing position is less common, but nonetheless can be couched in similar terms; the denial that black people are racially equal to white people. Go back less than 100 years, though, and the second position would stand you in pretty good stead as a European or American citizen wanting to get ahead in the civilized world.

A denier is someone who adopts a denial position. For instance, I deny that economic growth is a necessary characteristic of human society, which places me very much in the minority of people in the civilized world. I've discussed the reason for this elsewhere, needless to say the opposing position – that economic growth is a necessity – is far more cultural than based on an absolute body of factual evidence. That is important, because it helps understand why denial positions are so difficult to deal with: if someone is deeply inculcated with a particular belief, such as economic growth

being a necessity, then no matter how much contrary physical evidence is presented to them, they are highly unlikely to change their position. If that physical evidence is overwhelmingly contrary to their belief system then we say they are “in denial of the facts”.

That, of course, often only serves to inflame things.

The Danger Of Denial

I make no bones about my belief in anthropogenic global warming, for various reasons, and not just the scientific evidence; so if you are reading this and thinking about clicking somewhere else because you don't agree with me, then click away – this essay is aimed at those people who more or less have the same mindset as myself, and are in the all-too-common situation of feeling they have to defend that position. To you, dear reader, I offer the following words: “You are in danger of losing your sanity.”

As we have seen, and probably realised from experience, arguing with a Climate Change Denier is like wrestling in a deep, muddy pit: it can be filthy, exhausting and, worst of all, there seems to be no way out. Personal issues aside, the wider danger is that the other side might get their way – and that person, or group, or business, or government, will then be able to spread their own beliefs in the knowledge that there is no-one willing to take the opposing position. The many people who are wavering, or even understand that AGW is fact, can then be easily tipped into denial. This is what happens in totalitarian states: the ruler's position becomes the de facto belief.

In ecological terms, this would be disastrous should it happen against AGW, for there would not even be enough dissenters to restart the process of change, let alone carry it through. It's strange in a way – all the time it has seemed like an endless game of factual table tennis, it has in fact been a battle for the future of humanity, played out in a million places across the globe.

It will come as no surprise that climate science is not completely accurate – it is highly complex, heavily dependent on modelling, and relies on a huge amount of real-time data gathering. If ever a branch of science was a ripe denial opportunity, it is this one. So while the scientists do their job building up the case for action, the deniers continue to hack at the inevitable flaws in the science...two steps forward, one step back, and so on until it is too late to do anything about the environmental changes that the main body of scientists and their proponents had been pretty sure would happen soon. The deniers will have “won” their battle because – and this is where it gets pretty scary – it seems that by the time the changes start to be observed, it is almost impossible to reverse them

On the other hand, the deniers also lose, because we all lose if runaway climate change takes hold.

Now here's a bit of bad news for an awful lot of people: however complete and convincing the evidence presented, no scientific case will have any effect on a deeply entrenched denier. As I said earlier, the entrenched Climate Change Denier isn't the slightest bit interested in the main body of evidence. To counter this position, and thus provide the people who are in danger of slipping into the muddy pit with a safety rail, something different is needed: a powerful argument based on a combination of incontrovertible facts, and a heavy dose of good old-fashioned logic or, as Bertrand Russell called it, “the great liberator of the imagination.”

The Logic Bomb

There is an inescapable difference between mathematics and science: in essence, a mathematical proof is an absolute proof, which can never be refuted; a scientific “proof” on the other hand, is transient – it exists until a piece of contrary evidence emerges that is sufficiently powerful to undermine, or at least alter, the “proof”. All science is like this; no matter how credible the evidence, there is always the danger that one day it will be scientifically refuted. This happens quite a lot; not so much in the older branches of science such as classical physics and anatomy, as in far newer areas like quantum physics, microbiology and, as we have seen, climate science.

In mathematics this can never happen if the proof is logically sound.

Now, I'm not saying that it is possible to create a perfect analogue of mathematical proof within a scientific context; but it is possible to use a logical argument to create something that is very, very difficult to deny; largely because it doesn't depend on predictive science, but on things we already know have happened, and are still happening. I want to make this clear, there is no argument, whether scientific, logical or even physical, that will change the mind of a deeply entrenched Climate Change Denier. On the other hand, a logical argument is far more likely to silence them* and, more importantly, help prevent an impartial or mildly sceptical person from slipping into full-blown denial.

“However complete and convincing the evidence presented, no scientific case will have any effect on a deeply entrenched denier.”

For that reason, I will no longer engage myself in a scientific argument with an ingrained CCD --there really is no point -- instead, I will use this: the logical argument against Climate Change Denial.

Part One

The history of Climate Change Denial (CCD) is essentially a history of corporate lobbying since the early 1980s. It was the oil companies, the coal mining companies, the car manufacturers, the road constructors, the loggers and all the other corporations who would obviously not be able to carry on business as usual if they were found to be changing the climate, that did it first, and did it big time. The history of AGW denial is deep, dark and sophisticated and it involved some of the finest creative and persuasive minds that have ever graced the corporate and political stages. Corporations were responsible for and funded some of the most successful denial lobbies: think of the Global Climate Coalition, The Heritage Foundation, The Oregon Institute and The Cato Institute for starters. This is taken from an excellent primer about their work, in relation to the activities of ExxonMobil:

Some of those on the list have names that make them look like grassroots citizens' organisations or academic bodies: the Centre for the Study of Carbon Dioxide and Global Change, for example. One or two of them, such as the Congress of Racial Equality, are citizens' organisations or academic bodies, but the line they take on climate change is very much like that of the other sponsored groups. While all these groups are based in America, their publications are read and cited, and their staff are interviewed and quoted, all over the world.

By funding a large number of organisations, Exxon helps to create the impression that doubt about climate change is widespread. For those who do not understand that scientific findings cannot be trusted if they have not appeared in peer-reviewed journals, the names of these institutes help to suggest that serious researchers are challenging the consensus.

Corporations were, and still are responsible for some of the most successful advertising and PR campaigns ever created, trying to convince the public that everything is fine and they should carry on doing what they do. A classic example is the "...we call it life" campaign created by the corporate-funded Competitive Enterprise Institute; but there are many other, far more subtle examples which – and this is the idealistic principle I alluded to earlier – attempt to convince people that the infinite growth model of Industrial Civilization are fundamentally a "good thing", and that AGW is just a distraction. You don't have to explicitly deny something to be a Denier, you can simply sweep it under the carpet; or, as is becoming more common, bury it or pump it into the ground.

If the denier doesn't agree with you about the history of corporate denial, then they are clearly deluded, and you are within your rights to say so – again and again and again. The historical facts bear this out and *no Climate Change Denier can disagree with this part without making themselves look foolish.*

Part Two

As the science has become more certain in favour of AGW, it has become ever more difficult for deniers (by this I mean both individual and collective) to use the scientific argument in their favour. It is, as we have seen, still possible to argue over the fallibility of scientific "proof" and just how large the body of evidence actually is; but with a bit of intelligence, deniers can use a far more subtle tool. This, unfortunately for them, is a big mistake.

As documented in a Newsweek article by Sharon Begley, the style of political lobbying moved, especially in the USA, from blatant stonewalling in the 1980s and 1990s, to an "uncertainty" agenda at the beginning of the 21st century:

"If they presented the science honestly, it would have brought public pressure for action," says Rick Piltz, who joined the federal Climate Science Program in 1995. By appointing former coal and oil lobbyists to key jobs overseeing climate policy, he found, the administration made sure that didn't happen. Following the playbook laid out at the 1998 meeting at the American Petroleum Institute, officials made sure that every report and speech cast climate science as dodgy, uncertain, controversial—and therefore no basis for making policy. Ex-oil lobbyist Philip Cooney, working for the White House Council on Environmental Quality, edited a 2002 report on climate science by sprinkling it with phrases such as "lack of understanding" and "considerable uncertainty." A short section on climate in another report was cut entirely. The White House "directed us to remove all mentions of it," says Piltz, who resigned in protest. An oil lobbyist faxed Cooney, "You are doing a great job."

Given the huge success corporations have had in dictating the political agenda through lobbying, funding, advising and – particularly in the Bush era – staffing the corridors of power, it's not surprising such a tactic remains extremely effective. But corporations, and politicians, know that what really drives the economy is public opinion: if people do not have confidence in something then they will not adhere to it, which is why Consumer Confidence is such a crucial economic measure. The moment the buying public loses confidence, then they stop being a buying public, and instead turn into a saving, or even reacting public – which is bad news for everyone in a position of power.

To counter this, the corporate world has had to cultivate an air of concern, whilst ensuring this does not impact on their bottom line. The key word here is Greenwash. When you see a claim that a vehicle is "cleaner" or that deforestation is "sustainable" or that you can "offset" a polluting activity or that emissions can be buried, what you are seeing is

the business world allaying the concerns of a public increasingly aware that climate change may be a “bad thing”. If we can be made to believe that our concerns are being accounted for, then we are far less likely to stop spending money, and most unlikely to ever rebel against the status quo.

To reach a conclusion about denial, therefore, what we have to focus on here is the net effect of any of these things: a “cleaner” vehicle is still producing carbon dioxide gas; deforestation, however many trees are replanted, still has a negative effect on the overall forest ecosystem; flying or using electricity still emits greenhouse gases, which cannot be offset like-for-like in any meaningful way; capturing carbon and pumping it underground will never account for a majority of coal-fired electricity generation.

The denial here is, as I said, subtle; but it is most definitely present. We are being manipulated by a collective body with a vested interest in not letting us know how bad AGW will become. *If the reality wasn't so bad, and the deniers didn't believe in this reality, then they wouldn't be working so hard to prevent us from knowing the truth.*

Part Three

Now, here's the final part of your argument; one that is becoming increasingly important to have in your armoury: *Who has the most to gain from a popular belief in anthropogenic global warming?*

A lot of denial – now that even the most corporate-minded politicians and dirtiest companies at least say humans are causing the climate to change – is now related to the amount of financial benefit it is claimed politicians, scientists, “green” companies and (get this) those campaigning simply to protect nature, will gain from a populace that believes humans are causing the climate to change. I make no bones about my condemnation of the huge amount of money that is being made off the back of people's concerns to protect the planet; from the small company selling low(er) energy gadgets, to the professional consultancy advising businesses how to be more environmental friendly (or at least appear to be), right up to the aforementioned corporations that need us to keep spending as usual to keep the economy growing. In fact, I write about this all the time on another web site, such is my anger. However, we need to address the increasingly popular accusation that AGW is an invention solely to make money, or hand power to a believing few.

It is worth pointing out the inescapable irony of such an accusation; given the incontrovertible history of lobbying and subsequent financial and power gain that the CCDs have been a party to. I admit that turning such an accusation on its head may seem to be playing into the hands of the deniers, but the accusation itself seems to assume that it is possible to play the same trick on both sides of the fence. Nothing could be further from the truth.

To show this, let's look at some of the main players, and see what would really happen were AGW to be accepted in all of its scientific legitimacy – how would each player gain, or lose:

Politically, there aren't any real winners: civilized humanity has screwed up the planet and politicians deservedly look terrible across the board because they have helped bring this upon us. In addition, no politician wishing to profit from greenwashing will be able to pull the wool over the electorate's eyes for long. Admitting AGW is real and potentially catastrophic makes most of them look stupid and, in the eyes of a free-minded electorate, unelectable.

Corporations don't win at all, unless they are able to greenwash sufficiently to make us buy more stuff, or do more polluting; but in the end, even the most effective greenwashers will have to admit that if we truly want to prevent climate change, their businesses are screwed. Admitting AGW is real and dangerous makes corporations scared.

The Global Elites are comprised of corporate heads and leading politicians: all but the most paranoid conspiracy theorist has to admit that there is no secret cabal formed of all-powerful elites that will benefit from a belief in AGW; we know who the elites are, and as I have already shown you, AGW is bad news for them.

Scientists are a mixed bag, but if you separate those who may be influenced by corporate and political funding – based on what I have said above – and those who are decoupled from any such funding (and there plenty of scientists who are) it is clear where the division lies, and why some scientists are more radical in their views than others. A fully decoupled scientist has no more or less to gain from AGW than any other member of humanity.

Humanity in general has everything to lose from a rapidly changing climate. However, if we truly believe that humans are causing the climate to change, and that we have to fundamentally change our behaviour, without the meddling of corporations and politicians, and if we do manage to avert catastrophic climate change then, yes, humanity as a whole will benefit, as will virtually every ecosystem on Earth. It's just that this benefit is not financial – it is far more important than money.

“For those who do not understand that scientific findings cannot be trusted if they have not appeared in peer-reviewed journals, the names of these institutes help to suggest that serious researchers are challenging the consensus.”

It follows that Climate Change Denial, not acceptance, is the result of a desire to ensure the existing powers that be maintain dominion over ordinary human beings. The denial position is the position of the elite minority that run Industrial Civilization, and that of anyone who knowingly accepts this as a good thing. The terminally flawed principle of economic growth being a necessary part of human society is holding the entire CCD industry together.

Reject this principle, and the entire monolithic Culture of Maximum Harm, along with the denial that humans are on the path towards irreversibly changing the entire global ecosystem, falls apart. Reject this principle and we stand a far better chance of surviving the future.

As If Humanity Actually Mattered

I am about to make you feel uncomfortable. Sorry, but there's no way of avoiding it if I'm going to tell this story as it should be told.

You are a human being; a member of the species *Homo sapiens sapiens*, although the second "sapiens" was only put there because we like to feel we are important. Remember that. There used to be other species within the genus "Homo" but they died out, or were possibly killed off, most recently a few thousand years ago when *Homo neanderthalensis* finally succumbed to the insurgent sapiens somewhere on the Iberian Peninsula.

On a smaller scale, you are a collection of major and minor organs, bony structures, muscles, ligaments, tubular networks, soft tissues and various other organic materials; all structured in such a way that you are capable of living in a vast range of habitats and climatic zones, under tremendous pressure from all sorts of predators and invaders, from large animals to minute single-celled organisms. Through an extraordinary evolutionary process, your constituent parts have developed to fill an optimally agile and self-regulating body such that they are able to function in tune with each other, symbiotically and independently as required, while you get on with the business of being a conscious and self-aware individual.

Each of these constituent parts are constructed from billions of cellular structures of various types which, if not part of your body, would be considered organisms in their own right: fragile, yes, but only because they have evolved to become at least partially dependent upon the whole of which they are a tiny part. Within each of your cells are components called mitochondria, which convert the raw materials of proteins – amino acids – into energy, which the cell uses to fulfil whatever function it is required to

as part of the multi-cellular thing that is your body. This may involve fighting off viral invaders, absorbing nutrients from food, expelling waste from blood, moving in time with muscular activity or firing off a message to a neighbouring cell to recall an image of something that happened in your past.

Each of these mitochondria are specially adapted bacteria, that once independently existed, but at some point were "hijacked" by or may have taken up residence in, an animal cell that would, from then on, benefit from the energy produced by the mitochondria – the same cells that constitute an infinitesimally small part of a component of an individual human being, among something like 6.8 billion other human beings on Earth. 6.8 billion human beings that are utterly dependent upon the rest of the massive food web of which they (we) are just a tiny part.

"We sit as a delicate flower waiting to be blown away in the next breeze of extinction; yet what do we see as the most important factor in our role as human beings?"

"Money."

You eat fish? The chances are that if you live in the Industrial West, your fish was a carnivore that ate other fish. If you live in China or Indonesia, it is more likely that your dinner was vegetarian, missing out a few links in the chain, and retaining a lot more of the food energy that came from the algae, or phytoplankton, that ultimately derived its energy from sun by virtue of the photosynthetic process that uses solar energy to split carbon molecules off from oxygen molecules, and create carbon structures that constitute the building blocks of life.

But, of course, it's not only the animals or plants you eat (and that they may eat or utilise in the form of soil and "waste" products) that you are dependent upon, but the crucial role each of these organisms plays in the various natural processes that take place on Earth: regulation of the climatic-oceanic system; soil formation; water purification and enrichment; nutrient distribution...in the world we live in today we would not survive without all of these processes operating at a high level of efficiency. Interfere with these processes at a local level, and ecosystems can collapse; damage these processes at a global scale, and the entire biosphere is forced to readjust. With humans at the very top of the food chain, and so dependent upon everything else, we will be some of the first casualties of any global extinction.

Try and balance a pencil on its tip.

The Psychosis Of Civilization

This beautiful continuum, of which we are such a physically insignificant part, takes some imagining. The numbers are mind-numbing – individual nematodes alone stretch into the quintillions, and bacteria are many orders more numerous – as is the complexity of the ecological nets that link together different animals, plants, fungi and the countless other organisms that actually constitute the great majority of all life on Earth. We sit as a delicate flower waiting to be blown away in the next breeze of extinction; yet what do we see as the most important factor in our role as human beings?

Money.

As I have discussed on The Earth Blog previously, our values have become outrageously skewed in favour of whatever benefits the onward march of the global economy. We do not see the rise and fall of habitat viability on the television news, instead we see the rise and fall of the markets in the capital economy; we do not count specie extinctions in newspaper bar charts, but we urgently count companies going bust; we do not map the catastrophic breaks in the energy flows between different parts of an ecosystem, but we do acknowledge every time a budget airline discontinues a route, or whenever a main road has “severe” delays. As if it matters.

The psychosis of Industrial Civilization is endemic: every person that places his or her trust in the system of hierarchies, politics, markets and mass consumption, undergoes a fundamental readjustment in priorities. No longer does the fate of our species rest upon our increasingly precipitous position within the global ecology; we can all hold hands, actually or virtually, and celebrate the majesty of the global economic miracle, safe in the knowledge that it will take us forward into a glittering future of jobs, money and all the other civilised things we have been taught to desire.

How we have become so determined to destroy the continuum of life in search of something so utterly trivial, has its roots in the history of civilization. Every civilization has had its own goals, but ultimately they have all come down to one thing: the insatiable desire to progress in whatever way is dictated by the elite members at the very top. Such “progress” takes many forms, but whether it be exploration, scientific discovery, technological prowess, imperial power or simply the idea of being “the best”, civilizations have to feel they are progressing in some way; and so its subjects – the civilians – become part of that collective desire. For what are we if we don’t keep progressing? Failures. From our fear of failure, others above us draw their strength – just at the moment we seem to be reaching the end, and as we stretch out our fingertips, another line is drawn even further away. So we note the new goals and conform to the wishes of the system; continuing to do as we are told.

Through this psychotic behaviour, civilizations thrive...until they fail.

What Is Really Important

When I wrote the chapter called “Why Does It Matter?” in my book, *Time’s Up!* I felt rather uneasy; as though I hadn’t managed to explain myself properly. The problem was that, beyond the physical argument for the continuation of our DNA that I offered, there was also a complex and deeply-philosophical explanation that I also had which didn’t translate well into words. It was like a version of the argument that Descartes gave for the existence of God; to paraphrase: “I have within me a perfect and unequivocal representation of God; how could that be so if there were no God.” It’s a terrible argument, but it demonstrates well how a very good idea – which Descartes no doubt thought was perfect at the time – completely fails to work when written down.

I’m going to have another go.

So, how *do* you feel about your place in the world? Do you feel small, insignificant, worthless, just a tiny part of something far greater than yourself? This natural feeling of inferiority when you realise you are just a tiny part of a greater whole is the reason why medieval religious leaders were so resolute about our exalted position in the Great Chain of Being, just below the angels, but above all other forms of life – so long as you accepted that monarchs, priests and landowners were considerably more perfect than the rest of us.

It’s the same in the industrial economy: there is this global system that has enormous, if transient, power over the whole of existence; that governs every aspect of the lives of the civilised, but you don’t have to feel small, so long as you are told how important it is to go to school, get a job, go to the shopping mall or buy something online, follow the latest fashions, and cast your vote. You are empowered by your participation in these activities. It’s just that some people are more empowered than others.

But why on Earth do you need to be told how important you are? It speaks volumes about our state of mind when in order to feel worthwhile we have to, for instance, achieve good grades at school. We are all human beings, for goodness sake! Even more than that, we are what we are: our consciousness is bound up in our physical being, and everything we know and feel – everything we will ever be – is determined by our personal interaction with what is around us. We are at the centre of our personal universe; not in any selfish way, but simply because we can never truly perceive anything outside of our point of view.

Thomas Nagel, the American philosopher, summed this up beautifully in his essay, “What Is It Like To Be A Bat?”:

After all, what would be left of what it was like to be a bat if one removed the viewpoint of the bat?

Substitute “human” for “bat” and it is obvious that human experience has to be a unique thing for humans and, by extension, for each individual human. That is why we are important; not because humans are essential to the global ecology or even because we are essential to the absurd construct we call Civilization, but because **what matters, is what matters to us.**

How could it be any other way?

Think about this for a short while and it becomes clear that the civilised world’s destruction of the natural environment cannot under any circumstances be acceptable, for it will endanger the one thing which matters above all else: ourselves.

Decision Time

You have to make a choice. Are you going to continue supporting and extending the global reign of Industrial Civilization; or are you going to once again learn to value yourself as the centre of your universe, and the thing that matters above all else?

To me that choice is remarkably easy, but you might take some persuading, not only because of the insidious hold that the civilised world has upon everything we do, but because you are possibly thinking that I have left something out – the other things that also matter dearly to you. Fear not; this is what I wrote in Time’s Up!

More than just our natural tendency to survive, though, is the manifestation of that survival instinct in the way we think. Consider the question: What would you risk your life to save? My initial instinct is to say ‘my family’, then ‘me’, then, with a little more thought, ‘the Earth in general’ and ‘my friends’. Remove the Earth from the equation and you have the kind of answer that most people give.

In fact, all three typical responses are directly related to the natural instinct for survival. We instinctively want to protect our families in order to secure the continuation of our DNA through blood relatives and the people they depend upon to survive. We want to protect ourselves in order to protect our own DNA, and the opportunity for that to be further replicated. We want to protect our friends because they too are human beings, but not only that, we have consciously chosen our closest friends because of what they have in common with us – they are almost like family.

I have said that I was not entirely happy with the strength of reasoning I gave in the book, but with the addition of the philosophical argument to the obvious need to replicate our DNA – the survival imperative – then we can all be justified in wanting not only to protect ourselves, but also our families and those other people we really care about and need: the community.

Community is the antithesis of civilization for civilization thrives on the division of humanity into tiny, atomised, competing parts; but community is the form in which humans have always survived best. The choice is simple now: Civilization or Community; Progress or Humanity; Death or Life.

“What matters, is what matters to us.”

The Problem With...Civilization

Civilization or civilisation n. an advanced stage or system of human social development

(Concise Oxford English Dictionary)

Something BETTER than civilization is awaiting us.

(Daniel Quinn, Beyond Civilization)

How is that possible? One must be wrong, and it must be the second one because we know that civilization is all; we know that to be civilized is the pinnacle of human achievement; we know that we are better than what has come before us.

And that’s why Daniel Quinn is right.

I'm not certain you understand what I'm saying. For sure, you probably get the meaning of the words and the sense of the syntax, but if the rest of this society is anything to go by, the chances are that you don't understand – yet. Forgive me if you do: if you truly understand, and you agree that something better than civilization is awaiting us, get on and start finding it; help others to find their better future too; hasten the end of the thing that so many of us are enamoured with.

Stop reading. Where are we now?

Half the world's tropical and temperate forests are now gone. The rate of deforestation in the tropics continues at about an acre a second. About half the wetlands and a third of the mangroves are gone. An estimated 90 percent of the large predator fish are gone, and 75 percent of marine fisheries are now overfished or fished to capacity...Species are disappearing at rates about a thousand times faster than normal. The planet has not seen such a spasm of extinction in sixty-five million years, since the dinosaurs disappeared...Persistent toxic chemicals can now be found by the dozens in essentially each and every one of us.

This summary, written by one of the most eminent living environmental analysts, James Speth tells the tale of awful side effects, the kind that only became possible – imaginable, even – with the rise of Industrial Civilization. Civilizations have come and gone, like the flooding and ebbing of tides across the globe and throughout time: they appear, they take from the Earth, they grow, they become exhausted and they, invariably, collapse spectacularly. Civilizations are all different to a certain extent, but all of them leave their imprint in some way.

How To Be Civilized

It's such a grand term: Civilization. But it is really just a word, like "leaf", "stone" or "baby", that has defined itself in the highest sense possible – "civilization" speaks to us with such importance because it demands to be heard, and hear we do, by defining ourselves in its image...

Civilized

Civility

Civil

Citizen

They all mean the same thing, in truth: City Dweller. The most obvious physical manifestation of civilization is the city, something totally alien to any uncivilized culture. Cities are one manifestation; there are others that are less physical, but no less integral for all that. According to the influential but now sadly defunct Anthropik Network there are five key features that are common to all civilizations:

1. *Settlement of cities of 5,000 or more people.*
2. *Full-time labour specialization.*
3. *Concentration of surplus.*
4. *Class structure.*
5. *State-level political organization.*

The four other features all require structures and systems in order to operate as effectively as possible so, for instance, in order to concentrate surplus food (so it can be given out, or rather sold, on demand) you must, as a civilization, have storage and distribution systems, the means to generate that surplus in the first place (i.e. mass agriculture), accounting processes and, of course, a means of asserting authority over that surplus. This feature and, in fact, all of the five features listed, point to the primary function of civilization: **a tool through which power and wealth can be accumulated by a select few.**

If you don't believe me, then look at the history of all civilizations, past and present, long and short-lived, large and small: they all begin in the same way – a small group of people wish to obtain more of something they haven't got, but cannot do this within a communal or tribal culture; they therefore, through a combination of force, propaganda and corruption, create something over which they have authority. The city becomes the realisation of civilization because within a city – as opposed to a sparsely populated series of small settlements – it is far easier to control the activities of the population. The city also acts as a symbol of the power of the civilization, can be easily defended, and can provide the highest-ranking members of the society a base from which their activities may be conducted.

State level political organization and class structure exist to provide an easy means through which power can be exerted, from top to bottom, as a continuation of the desires of the "founding fathers" (it's always fathers and not mothers, notice). Any kind of freedom in these areas, such as the opportunity to move up the career ladder, to educationally

better oneself or to have a bigger say in your local decision making process, are always conditional – step out of line and threaten the system in any way, and down you go, with the ladders being drawn up faster than you can blink.

The seemingly most innocuous of the five features – full time labour specialization – is potentially the most damaging of all in terms of social fragmentation and environmental damage. We all understand specialization; as employees we have set roles (clerk, builder, miner), and set positions (junior, manager, director) within an industry that itself is likely to only be part of a larger system. This specialization serves a most important purpose in any civilization – it ensures that those employed know their place, and once availed of that information are kept in that place wherever possible. You may move jobs, you may be promoted, but you still have your set place in employment. A side effect of this, and it is most definitely intentional in most cases, is the distance it creates between the job you carry out and the harm you may be doing.

As Curtis White wrote in his brilliant piece, *The Ecology Of Work*:

The violence that we know as environmental destruction is possible only because of a complex economic, administrative, and social machinery through which people are separated from responsibility for their misdeeds. We say, 'I was only doing my job' at the paper mill, the industrial incinerator, the logging camp, the coal-fired power plant, on the farm, on the stock exchange, or simply in front of the PC in the corporate carrel. The division of labour... hides from workers the real consequences of their work.

Weighing Up The Goods

You would be right in thinking that civilization has provided humanity with the kinds of things that, without it, would have never existed – civilization, after all, is extremely inventive. Some of those things are genuinely positive, such as the educational institutions that have provided valuable anatomical and medical knowledge, but they are in a desperately small minority. Most of the “positives” that we attribute to civilization are only positive at a very superficial level; dig down a little and something always seems to go wrong.

“Civilization has given us the ability to save money for the future.” Absolutely, but in order to obtain money you must work, and work in such a way that your earnings exceed your expenses – this means that somewhere, someone or

“The goods of civilization exist only for those at the top: for everyone else the dream will always remain unfulfilled.”

something else has lost out; money does indeed grow on trees, and if you can arrange a way of cutting down trees cheaper than you sell them for, you can make a profit. You put your money away, kept in trust by the bank that uses that money to fund socially irresponsible projects, further funded by the debt accumulated by the people who failed to make a profit. You lose your job, and dip into your savings and, for a while you manage, until it runs out and you have to find another job in order to recoup your savings. And why did you need the money in the first place? Could you not have been living self-sufficiently, bartering and skill-sharing with others?

In a city: you’ll be lucky. Welcome to the endless cycle.

“Civilization has given us the tools to communicate with others across the world.” So what do we do with that communication? We do what civilization tells us to: play games in artificial worlds on global servers; watch movies, television programmes and lots of clever advertising; be told about fantastic beaches that we must visit before we die; send rude jokes and chain letters to people we barely know. Sometimes we talk to our families on the other side of the world: families that fragmented and moved apart because the promise of a “better life” was more important than being together. We waste time licking the veneer of life offered by the high-tech world; and even when we do use the ability to communicate for altruistic reasons – like telling others what is going wrong with the world – it’s only because civilization has created the reasons we have had to do it.

The global city is the ultimate dream of the empire builders.

“Civilization has brought us clean air, clean water, safe food and safe lives.”

No.

Before Industrial Civilization the air was clean, the water was clean, the food was safe and lives were lived on our own terms, as safe or as dangerous as they needed to be. Civilization is trying to turn things around and, for some people, the air is cleaner, and the food is safer, but only if you live at the top of the pile. The bigger picture tells a very different story and as the influence of the industrial West merges with the desire of more and more nations to ape that sense of power and wealth, the health of the planet keeps moving towards “critical”.

The goods of civilization – if you even consider such disconnected, self-satisfied lives to be “good” – exist only for those at the top: for everyone else the dream will always remain unfulfilled. That’s the way it is meant to be.

Industrial Civilization is the most powerful and most widespread manifestation of civilized culture there has ever been. So many people across so many formerly distinct cultures and geographical areas are now part of it that it is hard to imagine there being anything else; and, for so many people having known nothing else for their entire lives, it is hard to imagine that anything could improve on it. Surely all we need to do to provide humanity with a liveable, safe and clean future is to improve Industrial Civilization in some way, through better use of technology, fairer voting systems, better labour relations and so on. But, of course, this doesn't stop civilization being what it is – a means of maximising the power and wealth of a selected few through the continuation of the very systems that have caused so much social and environmental misery throughout the history of this gargantuan edifice; whatever it takes, and whoever and whatever has to be harmed in the process.

"Something BETTER than civilization is awaiting us."

Now do you understand why Daniel Quinn is right?

To get to that better place you just have to stop believing that the answers lie within the most destructive thing that humanity ever had the misfortune to create.

Campaigning on the Edge of Society

Do you feel like breaking the law today? If you don't then I apologise profusely because, depending on where you live, you may have already broken it – just by looking at the picture at the top of this article. It's not a very good picture because the water looks like snow, but if you want to look a bit more, I won't tell. Go on, have a look at the trees in the middle of the lake and surrounding it; at the ivy climbing upwards; at the still water on a cold February day; at the security fence halfway up on the right-hand side.

You're not allowed to look at this. Liberating, isn't it?

On the day this photograph was taken an activist called The Ant nearly died. His life was only saved because a quick thinking police officer managed to manually stem the copious blood that was pumping from his left arm. The reason the blood was pumping from The Ant's left arm was because he had tried to escape from a police cell. The reason he had tried to escape from a police cell is that he needed to get back to the protest camp at Radley Lakes, Oxfordshire, where trees were being felled in rapid succession. The reason he was in the police cell is because he had tried to stop the trees from being felled.

The reason you may have broken the law is because the photo was taken from a position where journalists and the public are no longer permitted to film, and thus you are not permitted to see any such photos taken during the course of the injunction period.

The Radley Lakes protest has been well documented. There is a web site, and there are reams of newspaper articles – local, national and international – discussing the various machinations of the legal system that have allowed RWE to fill an important wildlife habitat (isn't every habitat important?) with toxic fly ash: the remnants of burning coal to produce electricity. In the course of this toxic lake occupation, RWE have been at pains to ensure that any trees that could contain nesting birds have been removed prior to the nesting season.

This is wrong on so many levels, yet the vast majority of RWE's actions have been perfectly reasonable in the eyes of the law. You don't believe me? Here is an extract from the charge sheet related to The Ant's arrest and subsequent injury:

"Other security officers have [sic] been alerted and have [sic] turned up to detain the defendant. The defendant was seen sprinting towards one of the contractors using the chainsaw. Fortunately the security men stopped the defendant before he could get to the contractor."

Read that again: "Fortunately the security men stopped the defendant..." Fortunately for who? Had "the defendant" reached the chainsaw operator, what would have happened? Would he have thrown himself on the chainsaw? Would the operator have turned around with the chainsaw blades whizzing and decapitated The Ant? Would the chainsaw operator have stopped felling the tree?

Read what you will into the charge sheet; to me the implication is clear: "Fortunately the defendant was not able to stop the felling of trees."



In case you think I'm being paranoid, here is a direct quotation from the 3rd charge laid on The Ant, entitled "Obstruct / disrupt person engaged in a lawful activity":

"On 14/02/2007 at Radley, in the County of Oxfordshire, having trespassed on land in the open air, namely Sandels Thrupp Lane in Radley, and in relation to a lawful activity, namely Cutting Down Trees, which persons were engaged in on that land, did an act, namely Climbing over Fence & running towards chain saws, which you intended to have the effect of disrupting that activity."

Do you feel like breaking the law now?

Pulling Punches

Last week I received a newsletter through the post from Greenpeace UK. It explained in detail the campaigns that are currently taking place and the successes that Greenpeace UK has achieved. I've been a member of Greenpeace for many years, and working with my local group gave me my first taste of activism – but it was only a taste. The Greenpeace newsletter reported on the reduction in cod that Birds Eye had made to their fish finger recipe, and how campaigners had removed incandescent light bulbs from Woolworths stores around the country. The word 'modest' springs to mind.

WWF in the USA, recently announced with great fanfare this year that one of their major campaigns had led to the establishment of a sustainable tuna fishery...consisting of 21 boats. The world tuna fleet totals between 2000 and 3000

vessels, that's less than 1% of the total fleet – way to go! For another campaign they are asking 'activists' to make polite phone calls to a senator between the hours of 9am and 5pm, so that he kicks off a hearing on the Law of the Sea Convention. The Government must be quaking in their boots.

"Breaking the law is utterly necessary where the law fails to protect the environment, or crushes those people who wish to make changes for the better."

The Sierra Club (the largest environmental organisation in the USA) have, on the other hand, announced their victory in stopping FEMA selling temporary mobile homes that may have high levels of formaldehyde in them. Oh, wait a minute, Fema are going to "reconsider" whether to carry on selling these trailers, but in the meantime they are still selling the trailers. But all is not lost; while their leaders make axis-shifting speeches, supporters are being encouraged to fly around the world so they can see wild places, and have a great adventure. I fancy Memorable Madagascar, for only \$3945, and I get to fly twice more when I get there – count me in, carbon fans!

All of these campaigns and activities, I assume, are carried out with the best of intentions, and not just to make the participants feel good about themselves. The only

thing is, they will not make a blind bit of difference in the long run.

It becomes increasingly clear – the more you look at them - that most of the campaigns fought by large environmental groups not only sit squarely in the comfort zone of that group's supporters and leaders, **but also conveniently sit in the comfort zones of the very companies and governments the campaigns are targeted at.** Not only that, but the law as it stands is almost always fully respected – do these organisations never get angry?

* * *

I love this planet. I had better do, because it's the only one that we have got. I get angry, very angry, at the acts of violence carried out to our planet by those who should - and do - know better. Derrick Jensen wrote, "Love does not imply pacifism". I could not have put it better myself.

Real Activism

Earth First! was founded for precisely the reasons above. Their web site reads: "Earth First! was named in 1979 in response to a lethargic, compromising, and increasingly corporate environmental community. Earth First! takes a decidedly different tack towards environmental issues. We believe in using all the tools in the tool box, ranging from grassroots organizing and involvement in the legal process to civil disobedience and monkeywrenching."

Civil disobedience? Monkeywrenching? Surely that implies breaking the law! Too right, it does. Breaking the law is utterly necessary where the law fails to protect the environment, or crushes those people who wish to make changes for the better. The long, exhausting and almost always illegal fight against apartheid in South Africa prior to 1990 should be a clarion call to environmental campaigners:

"The youth took to the streets, with the Heyta! Ta! Heyta! Ta Ta! of the toyi-toyi resounding in the townships. The targets of these protests were often the local community councils, which were seen as puppets of the apartheid state.

"Resistance spread rapidly, and by 1985, many townships in South Africa had become 'ungovernable'. At this point, trade unions and particularly COSATU, with the aid of the church, spearheaded resistance."

As protests continued to spread, the power of the police was increased by the Botha government, and eventually a violent deadlock was reached. Few people, I'm sure, would have wished to be a black activist in South Africa in the late 1980's, but at the same time who could possibly deny that law-breaking activism was essential.

You see, the apartheid laws in South Africa had been created specifically so that anyone opposing apartheid would be in breach of them. **The laws in most nations of the world are created in order to protect the interests of financial, commercial and land-owning bodies.** These laws, which most environmental campaigns happily observe, are there to protect the systems that are destroying the planet.

If a logging company wishes to destroy an ancient forest in Canada and they have been granted a permit to do so, it is a crime to stop them doing so. It is a crime to save the habitat that will be lost forever.

If a bauxite mining company in Jamaica wishes to dump toxic waste into pristine lakes and the government has given permission for this to happen, it is a crime to stop the company's mining operations. It is a crime to protect local people's drinking water.

If a coal fired power station in the UK is emitting 4% of the entire country's carbon dioxide and the government considers it a part of the Critical National Infrastructure, then it is a crime to shut down the operations of this power station. It is a crime – akin to terrorism – to try and prevent the planet from dying.

Do you understand?

In our modern, comfortable society, we see The Ant as abnormal; getting so angry about what is happening, and fighting in a manner which puts him perilously close to death. But the mad people aren't the fighters; **the mad people are the sheep who meekly accept the culture of consumption and the laws that keep them there.**

Asked if he would, with hindsight, go through the prison cell trauma again if he knew what would happen, The Ant said: "Hindsight is a lovely thing to have when things go badly wrong. Us hardcore non-violent campaigners can only do what is in our heart. That's one of the big problems with [civilised] humans, they think with their 'head' not their 'heart'. I would try and save life again, risking my own life, because all life is worth saving."

What If...We Connected

The wind is blowing hard, and the trees are bending down low, the air rushing across their branches, dragging leaves and blossom into the sky. The early summer grass, being soaked in the thick drizzle that falls in an urgent slant, ripples and chases with the gusts. A blackbird announces its territory, darting across the patch of green before being pulled askew by a fresh blast of air, still vocalising urgently. A family of humans are scattered throughout their house: one on a laptop, another immersed in a Nintendo game, the third goggling at the television that finds its market, and homes in on the hypnotised viewer. The humans barely hear the wind, let alone feel its embrace, as it batters the side of the house and cuts around leaving eddies of detritus dancing at the foot of the solid walls.

The trees and the grass and the blackbird feel the warmth of the sun as the wind drops and the clouds fracture like an ancient lace shawl. The atmosphere is thick with post-rain smells that rise from the soil, and the music of nature fills the sky in a celebration of continued life. The humans feel nothing different: they carry on living their civilized, disconnected lives.

Disconnected

Life exists in a complex embrace, the threads of each species' existence intertwining in such a way that balance is the normal state of things. If one part of the energy web overreaches itself, like a fecund herd of reindeer overgrazing the winter lichen, the system tips into a localised collapse, until balance is restored and the lichen has time to regrow among the now sparse reindeer population. This connection is absolute: no food, no life.

Connections go far deeper than this, though; for it is our innate understanding of the patterns of nature, as the species *Homo sapiens*, that makes us survivors in so many ways. Humans are superbly adaptable: able to find water, bring about fire, craft shelters and tools, follow scents and tracks to find food – all of this utterly dependent on the connections we make and refine from the moment we emerge into the sensory storm that is the real world.

And then we shut the door; shut the windows; shut the blinds; shut our minds...it's still going on out there, but we would rather let the caustic rain of civilization wash it away and supplant it with connections that have been manufactured to keep us in our place. We feel safe, even though we are on the edge of catastrophe; we enjoy what we do, even though we have forgotten what joy feels like; we experience self-worth, even though we have become worthless; we feel in control, even though we have no control at all...the system has us where it wants us. And now it can use us like the metaphorical batteries and cogs that signify our labour and our spending, and our naïve compliance in which we live our synthetic lives, from the plastic toys we grasp as babies to the flickering, energy-sapping screens that fix our attention on the advertisers' world; from the blacktop roads we populate in our teeming masses, contained in metal caskets with wheels on our way to and from our places of work, to the offices and factories and shopping malls we spend a third of our lives operating in order to keep the machine moving, in order that we can be given currency with which we, in our docility, reinsert into the system so it can keep growing, and taking, and killing everything it is able to reach.

And when we feel weary, we take a packaged, predetermined vacation. And when we feel hungry, we eat a packaged, predetermined meal. And when we feel bored, we go to a packaged, predetermined slice of entertainment. And when we are of no more use to the system, we are retired...and only then do we, in those moments of reflection we never had during our urgent "productive" days, think about what we could have been.

Homo sapiens is connected. *Homo sapiens civilis* has had the connections ripped away from it.

What If We Connected?

We would be free.

In a culture that seeks to timeslice our attention span into smaller and smaller chunks, so that we are left always wanting more, but never reach what we think we are seeking, there is little time for contemplation. Silence is the enemy, and open minds are force-fed a diet of trivia in order to keep us sated.

"It's still going on out there, but we would rather let the caustic rain of civilization wash it away and supplant it with connections that have been manufactured to keep us in our place."

"Full silence departed; empty silence became like a weight around our necks, something to be cast off at any opportunity: anything to keep the flimsy cultural dialogue going, a defense mechanism against the naked, voiceless underpinning of life that was quietly lurking beneath." (Sandy Krolick, The Recovery of Ecstasy)

Civilized humans are born into a world where the big questions can only be answered by those in "authority", and the biggest questions are ignored, for fear that the answers may take people to a place that is not state-sanctioned or approved by the machine. So we must ask the biggest questions: like, "Why are we here?"

To a civilized, disconnected *Homo sapiens civilis*, there is no answer to this question, for there is no world outside of the civilized one. The best answer a civilized human can give is one that is framed only in the confines of his or her experience: we exist to serve the machine. The ecology of such an answer – for in

reality we exist to be a part of nature within the endless cycle of birth, life and death – goes no further than that which we told we are dependent on: the government, work, product, the economy. The true ecology of any answer in a genuinely connected state is limited only by the environment of which we are a part. Where does my food come from?

A shop.

Or the soil, the solar energy that warms it and the rain that falls upon it, and the countless micro-organisms that work as one to create the ideal growing conditions for the plant; that may feed an animal, that may feed yet another animal, or may simply be picked and eaten like the rosehip from the briar that bursts with flavour on a warm September afternoon.

The machine fears the second answer: we have to believe that our food is the product of a systemic, organised process that culminates in an economic transaction. If we don't then we might question the system and decide to grow or pick our own food, depleting the industrial economy of its energy. We have to believe that in order to live, then we must go to work and produce something, whether that be a consumer product, an energy flow, a service or an ersatz lifestyle; and we have to keep believing that this is the only way to live. If we don't, then we might fail to turn up one day, and the machine will have lost one of its cogs or rivets or pins. Take away too many parts and the machine will break.

Reconnecting

In the glass of the window that shields me from the world outside, I see the reflection of a tree, blowing in the breeze, and wonder what the air tastes like. I open the window and feel the cool air touch my face as the soft rain patters on the sill and wets the floor in tiny circles of darkness – difference. A sudden gust brings a litter of flora across the threshold that dances in the spaces and falls upon my feet – beauty. The blackbird sits on a swaying branch and tells its story in a burst of sublime avian music that pushes back the noise of the traffic below – joy.

I have let the outside in, and now I need to let the inside out. It's time to reconnect...

Finding My Identity

I have found an identity.

Is that really such a big deal? The thing is, I didn't realise I was missing one. There are so many things I could call myself: a human, male, a father, a husband, a writer, a thinker, a gardener, a campaigner...so many things that I feel pretty comfortable with, yet until a couple of weeks ago I didn't realise there was something missing; something that yawned inside me, empty and lacking substance.

As consumers we feel so fulfilled; everything is within arms reach, or just a short drive down the road in the shopping mall, or on the internet by next day delivery. Everything we could possibly need. Consumers are the lifeblood of the industrial economy: it is the confidence of the mass of consumers that characterises the health of the economy, for without an optimistic buying public there is recession, slump, depression and, finally, collapse. A perfect symbiotic relationship: the consumer has everything she wants, and the economy rises on the continued satisfaction of the consumer.

It's not quite that simple, though, because without one critical hook, the consumer will quickly start to question the nature of the relationship – maybe it's not so fulfilling after all, given that all that hard-earned money has to keep being pumped into the rumbling belly of the infinite beast. Unless there is something more, then the consumer might understand the absurdity of this endlessly cyclical, destructive, mind-hollowing culture: we all feel that emptiness and sense of pointlessness from time to time, don't we? It doesn't last long, though, because to question the consumer culture is to question ourselves: more than anything, the consumer identifies with the culture; the consumer is part of that culture.

Consumer is more than just a word – it is an identity.



The Consumer Identity

When I hear humans being referred to as Consumers, I get angry. Not only is it because of the obviously abhorrent nature of consumerism that I get angry, but because the word "Consumer" is such a blatantly imposed label – it stinks of domination, of the entrapment of human beings into a single archetype; state-sponsored and corporate approved. The template for the modern human.

What kind of bloody identity is "Consumer"?

We are raised, as civilians within the industrial world, to believe there is a single mode of fulfilment that will hold us in good stead from birth to death. We must never question it; we must never challenge it; we must only identify with it. Carolyn Baker describes this crisis of identity in her book *Sacred Demise*, in the following way:

Civilization's toxicity has fostered the illusion that one is, for example, a professional person with money in the bank, a secure mortgage, a good credit rating, a healthy body and mind, raising healthy children who will grow up to become successful like oneself, and that when one retires one will be well taken care of. If that has become our identity, and if we don't look deeper, we won't discover who we really are.

If we identify ourselves as "Consumers" then that leaves little space for anything else because, as Baker makes clear, the illusion that the civilized world creates is a lifelong one, and if we are to remain in its grip we must reject anything else that might conflict with that illusion.

There is no room for connection with the real world, the world in which we are part of the cycles of nature and the webs of life – connection to the telephone network or the internet is the consumer way; there is no room for the

brehtaking joy that comes from watching the sun rise across a beach, accompanied only by the cries of the gulls and the wash of the sea – you have to buy the experience from a travel agency; there is no room for the exquisite tastes and smells of your own grown or gathered food made into healthy meals for everyone to share – you can share a large bag of nachos with dip, while watching a movie on your plasma screen.

I gave up being a consumer long ago: before, I had no idea that's what I was; none of us have any idea how much of us is composed of this forcibly imposed identity...until we decide to stop being what the system makes us.

But the void is large, and the consumer identity keeps threatening to fill it with each advertisement, news broadcast, political entreaty and subconscious signal: we have to resist; we have to find something else to take its place.

Who Am I?

Not only must we find something so we are able to resist the often delicious attraction of the consumer culture, but we need something else because without identity we are less human. The evidence for this is compelling: identity from the dawn of humanity is written across the ground, the walls and the artefacts of everyone who has ever been part of a tribe or close community. The tongues of countless people have spoken, and still try to speak in myriad different languages, dialects and accents. The way we have dressed; the way we have expressed ourselves; the way we have made our lives different in so many subtle and deliberate ways shouts of the need for an identity, a commonality in our local culture that ensures the survival and enhances the success of each group that shares that identity.

I willingly retain the labels “human”, “male”, “father”, “husband”, “writer”, “thinker”, “gardener”, “campaigner”: they say what I do and, in part, what is important to me. They also help me to start constructing a new identity for myself, for in the absence of a tribe, or even a close community that I can become part of – being a non-consumer in the middle of a consumer world – finding true identity will always be a struggle. The pieces are coming together, though. I have discovered my Englishness, possibly the nearest I can currently get to a physical, tribal identity. I have the writer Paul Kingsnorth to thank for that:

Many of the people I met during my travels exhibited a solid, quiet Englishness that had nothing to do with pained intellectual definitions and everything to do with belonging to the historical landscape they were part of. This, it seems to me, is crucial. Landscape and belonging are tied inextricably together. Englishness, as an identity comes not from institutions or vague ideas about ‘values’ but from place.

I was born in England and I have lived here all my life. I love this country as a place, and I am content to root myself in the soil from which its life emerges. I have, very recently, also realised that a large part of what I write and speak about is rooted in Anarchy; the simple and natural concept that there is no place for arbitrary authority nor a self-selected hierarchy – the kind that the political and corporate milieu utilise to ensure we remain good Consumers. In that sense, Anarchist is the antithesis of Consumer, and I know which identity I am more comfortable with.

There are many other pieces for me to find; some of them may shuffle around and some may come and go over time, but at least I am now able to choose my identity for myself. That is a wonderful thing, one that we owe it to ourselves to fight for.

The Problem With...Hope

I need to talk to you about hope. I need to warn you about having it, for merely by having hope you could become nothing more than a bundle of ineffectual good intentions. Hope could, in fact, be the single most dangerous thing to have in the environmental struggle we need to face up to.

In order to understand hope fully we must first understand grief, for it is within the depths of grief that hope finds its most willing victims.

Grief

The Earth is not yet a dead planet, but already people are grieving its loss.

The process of grieving can be a very complex and drawn-out experience, leaping from immense highs to profound lows, not knowing what to believe or what to feel. Eventually, most people have moved from one stage to the next, backwards and forwards until they have reached the point where they accept the cause of the grief and are able to regroup and possibly move on to something else. Death may be an end, but it doesn't have to be the end.

Surprisingly, the grieving process is evident in almost everyone who has been touched in some way by climate change and the possibility of environmental collapse. Amongst most politicians and business people in the industrial West – the consumer culture – Denial was the first stage, within themselves (although I tend to think that this was more about maintaining the status quo than coping with loss) but especially to others – if customers and citizens could be made to believe nothing was happening then nothing had to change.

We have seen how this has now panned out. Years of false scientific evidence, corporate political lobbying, and the decapitation of any agreements that dared to challenge the twin gods of wealth and power kept the denial industry in business for a long, long time. Anger has been evident amongst those who saw the truth, but that anger was suppressed, brutally in many cases, by those who sought to maintain denial. Much of that anger was diverted into symbolic actions, like protest marches, petitions and billboard campaigns; all of which achieve nothing except sate the appetite of the angry. Politicians like symbolic actions – they dissipate anger; they allow the pretence of free speech and action to be advertised to the world; symbolic actions do not threaten the system.

Meanwhile, as the protests went on, and still the chances of the planet remaining habitable for humans increased not one jot, the corporations and the politicians realised the evidence for human-induced climate change was overwhelming and so quietly slipped into Bargaining mode. Another stage of the classic grieving cycle this, in effect, has allowed inaction to continue, right up to the present day: in Bali, in Hawaii, in Scotland – wherever the powerful meet – bargaining takes place, and nothing changes. Stupidly, much of the environmental movement see this process as a positive thing – stupidly they do not see beyond the veil of ignorance: the bargaining process is just a way of making sure everything can carry on for as long as possible without anything having to change.

I see many people that I know and love hit the fourth stage – that of Depression. “It’s all over”, “there is nothing we can do”, “we may as well give up.” Give up what?

“Give up hoping”, many say. And what have you been doing all these years: hoping for change, hoping people might see sense, hoping that right will prevail above all the darkness and evil? Before we have slipped into the Acceptance stage, it seems that so many people have already given up, as though the Earth were a corpse over which we have to shed tears, over which we pour our grief, while still hanging onto a shred of hope that something good may come of all this.

Some simply say there is no point in fighting any more; that the battle is lost and the victors – the powerful individuals and bodies that become more powerful with each victory – will take the spoils, whatever tattered form they may take. For these people, there is still a chance of rekindling the desire to fight, for they have not fallen prey to hope; the hopers have already been defeated by their own blind faith.

What Is Hope?

Not all hope is bad. There are actually two types. First, the benign wish or blessing that shows you care: “I hope you have a good day”, “Hope to see you again soon”, “I hope you pass your exam.” In isolation, and as merely a gesture then this kind of hope can make someone feel wanted. This kind of hope is nice – it is harmless.

There is a second kind of hope that is not harmless; it is the kind of hope that implies more than benign wishes. I call this kind of hope the “secular prayer”; it bears all of the hallmarks of religious prayer, and carries the same dangers that are faced when you entrust your future to it. This is the dangerous form.

I want to mention the use of prayer, since I brought it up here. There appears to be no empirical evidence showing one way or another that prayer works. The Religious Tolerance web site has carefully broken down the methods, results and reaction to all of the recent major studies carried out on the effectiveness of prayer, and the conclusion you have to reach is that prayer alone simply does not have any recordable effect. The reactions that that this statement invokes are generally along the lines that God must not be tested; more specifically: “You’re going to do your best to limit the prayer some people get so that you can measure the benefits for those who receive a lot of prayer? Do you think that’s how God intended prayer to be used?”

So that, appears to be that. Except that when you look deeper into the research, you find something very interesting. A widely cited and carefully controlled study into the relative effects of prayer on post-operative coronary recovery found no significant difference in recovery rates between those who received prayer unknowingly and those who did not receive prayer at all. But here’s the interesting bit: the group of patients who knowingly received prayer had a 15-20% worse recovery rate than the other two groups. Some commentators (along with, surprisingly, my 10 year old daughter) suggested this was because of the increased pressure of knowing you were expected to respond to prayer, but I suspect the cause to be down to something different.

“And what have you been doing all these years: hoping for change, hoping people might see sense, hoping that right will prevail above all the darkness and evil?”

Hope.

You see, when you hope for something to happen – not the benign good wishes, but the deep, heartfelt hope that aches for an outcome of your choosing – then something happens to you: your motivation to work for the desired outcome actually reduces. In effect this is the very opposite to the meaning of “giving up hope”. By entrusting an outcome to the ethereal entity that is “hope” then you are passing on responsibility to something that is out of your control. This is what you are doing when you pray: you pass on the responsibility for the outcome of your prayers to an external force.

What appeared to be happening to the coronary patients is that by receiving and accepting prayer, part of the responsibility for that recovery went out of the control of those patients, and perhaps even out of the control of the health-care professionals who were looking after them. A positive state of mind is often a vital attribute in recovering from illness, whether mental or physical, and also other conditions such as addiction. Quite how this works is uncertain – it may be related to the release of hormones known as Endorphins, or other more complex effects involving the immune system – but more studies than not show that maintaining positivity is beneficial. Knowing that someone cares about you enough to pray for you is one thing, though; thinking that the job of getting you better has passed from you to something you have no control over is another thing entirely.

Dereliction Of Responsibility

Every day, in all sorts of ways, we hand over the responsibility of our actions to other parties. We entrust religious leaders to act as proxy supreme beings, to give us blessings and pray for the delivery of our souls and a winner's cheque through the post for all. We entrust politicians to justly run districts, states, countries, the whole planet, on our behalf, and deliver whatever is in their jurisdiction from whatever evils we have asked them to deal with. We ask the heads of corporations to use profits wisely, to provide fair wages, allow union representation and listen to their staff and respond appropriately – we ask them not to destroy the planet. We ask environmental organisations to look after the planet on our behalf, to lobby fiercely and petition prudently, to give us a world worth living in.

We are guilty of a mass dereliction of responsibility.

Just like prayer, when we vote we hope the politicians will do the right thing after they have been elected. When we buy a product from a company, we hope that company are acting in the best interests of everyone and every thing they impact. When we sign a petition, go on a protest march or write a letter, we hope that it will change things for the better. But it is never that simple.

Voters vote for different things: your hope that a politician will increase pollution controls will be running counter to the hope of another voter that pollution controls are weakened. Your entrustment of a company that they will act ethically runs contrary to the basic needs of a shareholder in that same company, that demands an increase in profits, which requires poorer labour standards, increased use of natural resources, corner cutting and cost slashing across the board. Your petition or protest march may give you hope that something will change when in fact you have simply sublimated your anger and concern into a symbolic action that threatens not a single media executive, company director or head of state.

When was the last time you followed up one of your actions? Did you sign a petition, track the course of that petition to its target, find out the reaction of the target, question the target on why they didn't do as you asked, spoke to them in person, exposed their ignorance in public, carried on and on and on until what you wanted to be done was done? *Of course you didn't, because you hoped that signing the petition was enough.* You innocently believed that right would out simply because you placed your demands on the wings of dear hope.

Even after writing this, and knowing what I write is true, I still accidentally use the word “hope” when I really mean that I will make sure something happens. It's a terrible habit, and one that we have all become naturalised into doing. Once we become addicted to passing the buck to someone else, it's very difficult to take it back – but take it back we must:

“When we stop hoping for external assistance, when we stop hoping that the awful situation we're in will somehow resolve itself, when we stop hoping the situation will somehow not get worse, then we are finally free – truly free – to honestly start working to thoroughly resolve it. When hope dies, action begins.”
(Derrick Jensen, *Endgame*)

Stop hoping, and start doing. And keep doing it until you have achieved far more than you could ever have hoped for.

Sabotage Is Not An Option, It Is A Necessity

When the signal fails during the advertisement break, who will be screaming: the children in the middle of getting their fix of consumer messages; the shoppers finding out what they can buy on their next mall run; the drivers being tempted by vehicles with more power, more safety and more sexiness; the television sales executives placing advertisers' messages where they will be absorbed by the maximum number of people; the advertisers creating the adverts that sell product and dreams for their clients; the companies that produce the goods and services that make them money; the system that needs the children, the shoppers, the drivers, the sales executives, the advertisers and the companies to all play their part so that the economic machine can keep on turning?



You can make the system scream, if you want to.

Adam sits in his apartment in front of 5 kilowatts of broadcasting equipment, watching the channels, flicking and flicking until... "We'll be right back after this break"...474 MHz on scramble: and the aerial sends out a wave of television liberty, just until the adverts are finished.

It only takes a few hours until the "off" switches are used. The hypnotic dance of the lights across the glass teat that once sold dreams to the masses is now an unintelligible squall of white noise, cascading arcs of interference, static dissonance of interest to no one: least of all the children, the shoppers and the drivers. They look to each other, they talk, they connect: where once there was a room of atomised individuals hooked into their own electronic realities, there are families and friends once more.

Until Adam is prosecuted, and locked out of harm's way: a criminal, an airwave terrorist, an enemy of the system.

A hero.

Why Sabotage?

To understand the need for sabotage, we have to go back to a few basic principles. Rather than reinvent the wheel (if only the wheel had never been invented, then we would probably not be in this mess) here is a short list of logically connected statements, extracted from A Matter Of Scale (also "Time's Up!") that take us to an inevitable conclusion:

1. *The world is changing rapidly and dangerously, and humans are the main reason for this change. If we fail to allow the Earth's physical systems to return to their natural state then these systems will break down, taking humanity with them.*
2. *Humans are part of nature; we have developed in such a way that we think we are more than just another organism; but in ecological terms we are irrelevant.*
3. *Regardless of our place in the tree of life, humans always have been, and always will be the most important things to humanity. We are survival machines.*
4. *Our failure to connect the state of the planet with our own inarguable need to survive will ensure our fate is sealed. This must not happen.*
5. *In order to bring us to a state of awareness, we must learn how to connect with the real world; the world we depend upon for our survival. We are all capable of connecting.*
6. *Our lack of connection with the real world is a condition that has been created by the culture we live in. The various tools used to keep us disconnected from the real world are what make Industrial Civilization the destructive thing that it is.*
7. *To understand how to remove Industrial Civilization we must realise that we, along with everyone else in Industrial Civilization, are the system.*
8. *Industrial Civilization is complex, faith-driven and extremely sensitive to change and disruption. It will collapse on its own, but not in time to save humanity.*

So what is the next step, assuming you follow this line of argument?

It's obvious when you think about it: we need to do something that will remove the things that stop us connecting with the real world, the people around us and our own ability to think for ourselves. These "Tools Of Disconnection" are everywhere: advertising that makes us want things we don't need; legal systems that bind us to a standard way of living as prescribed by the state; communication systems that tie us into restricted, and synthetic means of connecting with each other; economic systems that deign to carry our lives along a path of material growth; education systems

that turn us into good and willing workers; corporate lobbyists who ensure that our every activity is touched by the hand of industrialization – all of these things and more work together to keep us under control.

We exist in a state of cosseted discontent: convinced that the way we live is the only way to live, and yet constantly craving more of the same.

The only way to ensure as many people as possible can live their lives in a sustainable, non-industrial, non-approved way is to take away the things that stop them thinking there is another way. To give the people a chance, we have to sabotage the Tools Of Disconnection.

Sabotage What?

The things I have mentioned are pretty esoteric and so the link between the things that stop us from being ourselves, and the things we can actually attack directly, needs to be made clear. I wish I could do so, but to do so directly, would be to place myself in a very difficult situation: at some point the words I write could be classified as terrorism; maybe not now, but maybe some time in the future when a growing number of people are carrying out many minor acts of sabotage (or, to be more specific, things that Undermine the Tools Of Disconnection) and it becomes clear that Industrial Civilization is starting to lose control over its slaves.

Adam lost his liberty because he chose to sabotage the media machine - the one selling the wares of the corporations that drive economic growth and environmental catastrophe - on a large scale. What he was doing lost no lives, and freed up the minds of thousands of people, but he broke the rules: he became undesirable.

That is the risk you take, but it is a risk that many people would think worthwhile. Adam didn't need to be caught – he could have used a smaller transmitter over a shorter period of time, working in loose collaboration with a number of similarly equipped and motivated people. He could have, under cover of night, stripped off billboard advertisements; removed advertising from public transport; blocked radio rather than television adverts. He could have.

And Sarah could have posed as a corporate lobbyist in conversation with politicians; or posed as a politician in conversation with corporate lobbyists. She could have got them to agree to things normally considered off limits. Sarah could have recorded the conversations and placed them on the Internet, making sure as many web sites as possible mirrored the recordings. She could have made the political system very unstable indeed.

And Pierre could have taken a job in an educational establishment, altering curricula to remove positive references to economic growth and the need to be good citizens; or perhaps sent a few memos to schools, without even needing a job at the education authority, requesting the downgrading of citizenship and economics, and the need for compulsory nature walks, gardening, community work and time for students to think freely. He could have given a few children their lives back.

And Rosa could have started spreading information about the dangerous side effects of certain carbon-intensive, highly processed food products – placing letters in newspapers and calling up radio stations. She could have posted information on financial web sites reporting on the financial precariousness of highly destructive companies currently trashing the planet for economic gain. Rosa could have created instability.

And Keith could have run a web site devoted to exposing and broadcasting the greenwashing and blatant environmental lies told by corporations, governments and even the half-hearted efforts of environmental charities, helping people to understand that what they see, hear and read may just be designed to keep them living a destructive existence.

They could have, and so could you...

Thinking About the Future

The future is everything we will ever know, and everything we have never known. Some people deny its existence: one group of people are the Pirahã of Amazonia, who have created for themselves a temporal bubble that reflects their highly sustainable, hunter-gatherer lives – the future is irrelevant because life is what is happening now, and they have no reason to doubt that they will continue living in the same way. Another group of people who deny the existence of the future are vast hoards of civilized humans, living in densely populated, money and resource dependent parts of the world: for them, the real future is too frightening to consider; so they have created for themselves an artificial one in which they can pursue whatever dream the civilized world considers appropriate to its way of being. If your dream future contains happy children, material goods, vacations, a good career and a fulfilling, healthy retirement in a world of infinite capacity and endless resources, why the hell would you want to know what is really going to happen?!

For the Pirahã, their future may be tragically cut short by industrial incursion, disease and a catastrophic change in their natural ecosystem; but they are not in denial, they have just had no need to fear the change that may come. We, on

the other hand, are perhaps in the terminal stages of a terrible collective state of denial, manufactured by a system that dares not speak the truth about the future: Industrial Civilization is close to ending, taking with it a great sweep of the global ecosystem as the machine claws at the air, the earth and the seas in a last-gasp attempt to stay alive. That future is one that even the most hardened survivalist would struggle to contemplate in all its dystopian horror. It mustn't get to that stage; but have no doubt, it will if we don't stop Industrial Civilization soon.

There is another future: to quote a recent correspondent, it is one that sits "beneath and between the cracks" of our current ideals. A more "mundane" existence, those that sell the fast-paced, luxury-filled dream would have us believe; a life of "toil", those that ply the cradle-to-grave career paths of the industrialised civilian would call it; a world of "bleakness", those that fill our heads with gigabytes and the artificial realities we dumbly obey would have us perceive. These may be the lies that keep us from seeking an alternative, but this alternative is still different. We are tied to our current lives in so many ways that any change – however vital, however potentially rich and fulfilling, however much it reconnects us with the real world – is difficult to perceive.

In order to make a new future, we have to first break with the past.

Breaking Bonds – Making Connections

This isn't a self-help guide. I don't know what your current circumstances are, so there is no way that I can guide you through the precise path you would be best to follow if (and that is a big "if", as you will see) you decide that you – and the people you spend your life with – want to make the break from Industrial Civilization. What I can do is write from personal experience, and share some of the issues myself, and others I know well, are having to face up to. The most difficult of these issues to address, I think, is breaking the bonds that tie you to your current situation.

Here is a short list of things that you may feel you are dependent upon, and which you might find it difficult to sever your bonds with or, at least, stretch them:

- *Family beyond those you live with*
- *Close friends*
- *People you share a social life with*
- *Work and other sources of income*
- *School*
- *Your "community" in general (neighbours, shops, clubs etc.)*

One factor that they all have in common are that they involve people to a great extent: personal ties, however complex or even fraught they may be, are certainly at the forefront of my mind when making decisions about moving to another place, and/or living in an entirely different way. To a certain extent it is about being rejected – how many people do you know that you can honestly say would wholeheartedly support your decision to step out of the world you and they occupy? Rejection can be hard to take, and so can the thought of losing a part of the world that you have become so used to – even if it just means you won't be able to see (eye-to-eye with) someone as often as you might previously have.

When you consider how important many of these bonds are in an objective sense, when compared to the kinds of connections we have lost with the real world then a sense of proportion does emerge. School is a place to train children to be workers, and work is predominantly a way of earning money to buy things you probably don't even need; the social interactions they also allow, as a by-product, can be gained in many other places. Those friends and members of your family that you fear you may not see so often: how often do you actually see them, and how important are they really to you...or you to them? The "community" you live in may bear some of the hallmarks of a close-knit neighbourhood, but if it really is a place where people can depend upon each other, then you are in a small minority. You may even be able to take some of these people with you...

The real wrench, though, is *change*. We all fear change, even though it may excite or enliven us, because change invokes primal fears about the need to be connected to the environment upon which we are dependent. It is for a very good reason that we adapt quickly to repetitive tasks; so that we are able to carry them out while still being aware of changes to our surroundings and, although this is probably a more modern phenomenon, being able to keep our minds busy whilst carrying out tasks that are not exactly stimulating. Sufferers of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) encapsulate this fear of change in any number of habits and behaviours – but really, OCD is just an extreme example of

"We are tied to our current lives in so many ways that any change – however vital, however potentially rich and fulfilling, however much it reconnects us with the real world – is difficult to perceive."

something we all experience from time to time.

Moving beyond civilization is, for most of us, going to be a change of immense proportions, at least in terms of the adjustments we will have to make to our lives in order to live in relative stability. We have become so used to being cosseted in a synthetic shell that the mere act of reconnecting with a world that has become alien to us evokes surprisingly strong reactions. My personal experience is that many other people see such connection as highly unusual, even laughable: these are clear symptoms of the reason we are destroying our life-support machine.

Don't forget that most of us have grown up in a world where, increasingly, there is seen to be only one way to live, and that one way is intrinsically disconnected from the natural environment that we come from, and are still part of. There are so many other ways to live, even to the extent that the next move you make could be towards a type of living that has never been experienced before, but which is no more wrong than any other way of living that has, at its heart, a survivable future. It seems that the perception of breaking bonds when we move to a different life is just part of the essential process of reconnection.

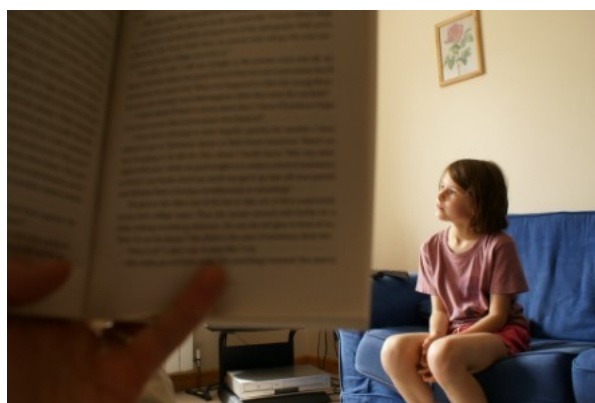
Talking About The Future

This essay was originally going to address just one thing: the way in which we talk to the people we love about the future, and specifically how we talk to children. It has become clear that to get to that point we first needed to address two other key things – the reason we need to change to a different future, and why change does not have to be for the worse. In a way, that simple assessment makes the act of talking about the future, and the inevitable changes we face, through our own tragic inaction or (and how can anyone deny this is better?) our conscious, proactive efforts; far easier to do. That's not to say it is easy, but at least we have a place to start.

Young children, in particular, seem to have a huge capacity for change: in a way they are templates for the final, and far more inflexible, adults they will become, having been shaped according to the culture they have grown up in. Ironically, my fear of change is not a fear for myself, but for other people, and particularly my children, who I don't want to hurt. In fact I am likely to be affecting myself far more than them, due to their natural resilience and, at least in the longer term, stunningly blasé attitude to change. I have observed children who have lost parents, undergone marital breakdown and been dragged all over the world to fulfil the career ambitions of their parents: and, by and large, they seem to have come out of it surprisingly unscathed. This is not to say that such events are not traumatic, but the point I am trying to make is that we, as parents (if you are reading this from that perspective) tend to overestimate the impact of change: you are more likely to traumatise a child by telling them they are going to be traumatised by a change, rather than just getting on with it.

That said, it is absolutely right, and essential, in my opinion, to treat children as equal partners in any decision they are going to – at least materially – be affected by. Conversation is wonderfully enriching for families: not only is it an opportunity to share ideas and opinions, it is also surprising what you can learn from the down-to-earth attitudes of children. Change should be a shared experience for so many reasons, not least because everyone involved is in it together: maybe that's just a truism, but it's one that is all too easily overlooked. Different people are affected by different things, and in different ways (as we have seen with the example of OCD); my children are no exception, and seem to change with the tides some weeks – one being highly emotional about an event while the other is completely untroubled by the same thing; then the next day it could swap round entirely. It's a dynamic that can be frustrating at times, but one that shows how important it is to understand those we are going to be taking with us into whatever future we choose to make for ourselves.

And don't forget, that although the future may seem bleak, catastrophic and frightening; it doesn't have to be like that. There is more than one future, and it's time to start thinking about yours.



In Truth, As In Beauty

I fear I cannot do this river justice. You can't taste words or hear what they try to convey; yet as I sit on a bank of the Tweed, a few metres to the north of, and below the house we have just moved into, I feel I have a story to tell. Pity the poet without a muse – maybe you can also pity the writer without the means to express this enveloping beauty.

The river speaks a thousand words,
In a thousand tongues so old
And wise. The ages move downstream
In dialogue; clear, precise and cold.

Last month we said farewell to a house that had taken two children through their formative years – the first eleven and twelve years of their lives; had seen the joy and drudgery of family life pass through its doors; had welcomed friends and family, some of whom would pass from this world too early, some of whom would best be forgotten – such are the quirks of fate.

I often dreamed of living close to a river; in all honesty, though, I think the river chose us in the end...

(I had to leave the bank for a while to rescue a loaf of bread from the oven, and met my daughters coming the other way down the steep, twisting path. They had made red-brown paint from the iron rich sandstone scattered across the bed of a burn that feeds the main watercourse. Already the surroundings have invoked a creative surge.)

...that sounds odd, I know, but it's worth putting it in the context of one of the core values of civilised society: the need to always push forwards in some way, the implication being that it is a fundamentally good thing to drive society towards some unreachable goal. I touched upon this idea of "progress" in my last article; here it takes on a different form, in the shape of my simple self, sitting on the bank of the river wondering what course of events could have led to this outcome. Sheer bloody-mindedness at certain points along the way, certainly, but I believe the outcome was far more to do with "letting go" and seeing how things turned out.

In November of last year we visited my parents at their new house for the first time; they having moved to Scotland a couple of months before. Whatever it was about the village (it's really a small town) they live in and its people, we felt drawn to the area and upon our return home started looking for places to live. It turned out we couldn't afford to live very near to them, not with the size of garden we were looking for, in order to grow food. But it seemed that the Borders of Scotland were a possibility. Then, over the Christmas period, we took the chance to view a house – a very cold one with lots of work needed, in a tiny hamlet with no shops – and were captivated by this area. Despite being stuck in a blizzard (or maybe because of it) we couldn't stop smiling.

With that property not looking viable, we chanced upon a cafe in the nearest large town, and got to talking with a local resident, who gave us her opinion of the places worth looking at, and those best avoided! The journey back was treacherous, but we still couldn't stop smiling. We returned to Essex and a few weeks later, having lost numerous nights to wondering what the effect of a move might be on the children (and us) began searching in earnest for places to live. In late January we put our house on the market, sold it within a week (to a chance viewer who happened to be passing the "For Sale" board), by which time we had selected four houses that we would view in a couple of weeks. The place we now live in was not on that list.

A few days before we left for the viewings, an unusual property appeared on the solicitors offices' website. My sister came across it after I had at first decided it was too quirky, and urged us to view it. It became the new fourth house on the list. Then, on a very cold day in February this year we embarked on "The Great Viewing" during which my younger daughter managed to vomit in a pub close to the first two houses we looked at (both underwhelming), and didn't feel too great in the third house. But we nevertheless accepted that the third house, in a village that was looking a bit run-down, might be the best option. Then we made our way to the final place – stopping at another pub en route (in which, thankfully, my virus-full daughter managed to keep her sandwich down) – which turned out to be so beautiful that we made a verbal offer on the spot.

Over the next few weeks, stress got the better of me somewhat – the inevitable result of dealing with two different legal systems – but somehow we completed our sale in time to make a proper offer on the house. We accepted that we wouldn't win, and started to imagine life in the third house; not so bad, really. Then our offer was accepted.

(We will be joining our younger daughter at the Village Lunch in about an hour – it's a sort of coffee morning, with soup and biscuits, which anyone can go to, and they do; from young families with babies, to the majority of the older children at the local primary school – including our newly settled-in daughter – right up to the oldest, most established pillars of the community. It's only our second time; but we already feel part of village life.)

After less than a month in our new house, in our new village, in our new country, we are starting to realise we are not on some idyllic holiday out in the countryside, but part of a thriving, friendly community. All the boxes are unpacked – one psychological bind already cast off – and I have been planting seeds to at least give us some extra food come the autumn. At night, when we manage to gather enough wood, there is a fire burning in the front room taking a small burden off the local gas supply; and if we look out of the windows just as dusk takes hold, bats can be seen flitting across the sky, taking tiny insects from the air in their hundreds.

Time has passed since I started this essay – a few days in fact, because there are so many jobs to do at the moment – so now I tap away in the kitchen while my wife looks over paperwork and my younger daughter reads in her bedroom, having returned from the local junior school a few minutes ago. An interesting array of sounds disturbs the peace; not in some cacophonous rage, but like a gentle swatch of contrasting colours: the quiet hum of the fan on the laptop; the movement of feet and softly clanking door catches as people move around the house; birds, always birds, full of sounds constantly defying simile; and my own breath.

This is my beauty – not some civilised artefact conjured up as a commodity to appease whatever is currently in favour, but a personal beauty that defies description. Like the insects pursued by bats in the dusk light, real beauty only stays for a moment before moving on, changing, pulling at the emotions for a heartbeat then diving away to be found again some other day.

I am struggling to work out what it is that makes this beauty so much more real than anything we purposefully seek; what it is that so harmoniously matches our desire for the apparently unknowable. I can only conclude that it is that very transient nature – the ever-changing, never static fluidity of the world we inhabit – that, for a split-second presents us with a truth that shouts: “I am the now!”

Does that make sense? To put it another way: what feels best of all? Think of the moments where everything comes together just right, so that a sense of purpose, contentment and security combine with a breathless freefall...and then it is gone and you are left with a feeling that you have experienced something that must be the truth.

Hush! There is a whisper in the air;
A fluttering light, a touch so soft,
A pungent scent, a time so rare.
It fills your head and heart with truth,
With beauty, with life. Then blink!
The whisper is gone...for now.

Someone bring me that poet.

What If...The Lights Went Out

A darkened room, its walkways dimly illuminated by emergency lighting and the displays of monitoring equipment, rumbles with the vibrations of cooling systems injecting chilled air towards hot processors and spinning disks. The shrill sounds of thousands of data storage devices fill the air, alongside the cooling systems; the relentless blinking and trilling of green lights goes on as data is sent and received through miles of copper and glass fibre. Clunk. Warning sounds – alarming cries from dumb systems that only know that something has failed. In a wink the UPS takes up the load, drawing power not from the high voltage mains, but from deep tanks of diesel embedded in the lower levels of this data centre. Management is notified and the call goes out for emergency supplies of liquid fuel: the contract says there is to be no interruption, and the fuel suppliers are on standby 24 hours a day. The fuel suppliers are receiving further calls, from a standing start they experience a tide of demand as throughout the city the power fails: data centres, hospitals, offices, government buildings, military installations – who gets the fuel first? Who gets the last reserves?

As Anne takes her first steps towards the bathroom, she understands something is amiss. Her clock is blank; no light seeps in through the blinds from the street; her fumbled attempts to switch on the bedside lamp were to no avail. The blackness is total – even the moon won't come out to play with the darkened surface of the world. Sirens broadcast their Doppler cries in distant parts of the town as Anne moves her left foot onto the next step down, and misses her footing...thump, thump, thump, down the stairs and into the wall; a sickening rip as her ankle bends askew. She pulls her way down the remaining steps and picks up the telephone, her breath is short – there is a tone, the telephone company keeps the system running through its own generators. She dials 9...the keypad is soundless. She hangs up then brings the receiver to her ear – nothing; the gentle burr has gone as the last diesel dries up at her local exchange.

It seems cruel to leave Anne like this; less so to let the disks in the data centre spin down – though this data centre and other like it service the largest financial organisations on Earth and tomorrow the markets won't be opening. Anne's plight is repeated across the nation as the switchgear reacts to low loads, shuts itself off and puts the grid into standby. The hospitals will be busy until their own power supplies drop out. The ambulances can do little but patrol – the mobile phone network failed hours ago. Like perverse moths to a doused flame, the drivers and walkers are out seeing what a darkened world looks like...for a while, until they panic.

Inexorably, the country grinds to a halt as the extinguished lights symbolise the start of turmoil in a culture whose lifeblood is electricity, and whose arteries are the cables that join the organs of state and industry together.

This is a warning: the peaks are approaching.

Peak Coal. If humans continue to burn coal at the current rate and the levels of oil burning and deforestation stay the same there is no doubt that the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere will reach 450 parts per million by the middle of the century. This is a critical tipping point. James Hansen makes the stark observation that the only way to keep carbon dioxide levels low enough for the climate to recover, in the current technology-based culture the industrial nations are exporting to the rest of the world, is to stop burning all coal. This is not happening: consumption of coal is rising as China and the USA gobble up their own supplies, and the rest of the world balks at the rising costs of (the already peaked) natural gas. Coal continues to feed the economic treadmill. The production peak will come by 2015 if we don't switch off the burners.

Peak Uranium. As there begins a drive for carbon free energy to feed a population whose electricity demand is growing – between 1983 and 2005 electricity demand doubled worldwide – the consumption of uranium is already exceeding its production. Uranium can be made to go further, but only through the production of plutonium. Thorium breeding is experimental, and even if successful will not produce enough energy to close the nuclear gap in time. The Uranium Peak is expected some time in the middle of the 20th century – sooner if coal is abandoned.

Some options remain. Renewables have huge potential, but are being rolled out abysmally slowly, and will never catch the peaks in time. Gas, as I mentioned is already on the wane, and the use of oil products will only cut into global demand for transport – at \$110 a barrel, it has already priced itself out of the mains electricity market. As mains supplies fail the industrial world's resilience rests on a continuous supply of diesel – just one demand placed upon an industry that is now digging up sand and shale to extract the last gobs of black gold. At some point in the near future, nations will lose their electricity supplies, with dire consequences for the infrastructure, and the people that depend on it.

“It calls itself the “developed” world: a world where machines usurped manual craft long ago, or use the hands of the poor to serve the rabid consumption of the rich. ”

Those That Don't Survive

It calls itself the “developed” world: a world where machines usurped manual craft long ago, or use the hands of the poor to serve the rabid consumption of the rich. A world in which economic growth is the measure of a nation and the ownership of material goods is the mark of the man, or the woman. A world in which leisure time bypasses nature and sucks up the money the “developed” world's inhabitants spend their working lives accumulating.

Above all, the “developed” world is an industrial world: one that defines itself through its use of technology – its cars, its planes, its cookers, refrigerators and washing machines, its computers, its electric lawnmowers and air conditioning units, its cranes, furnaces and steel mills. A world that depends on energy.

People in countries like the USA, Japan, Canada and Germany have, in just the last 50 years, morphed from seeing the continued supply of electricity as a luxury to savour, to demanding vast quantities that run every aspect of their lives. When the electricity goes off, lives switch off. Not only will there be widespread panic, accompanied by the inevitable looting and violence which distinguishes societies that live on a psychological knife-edge; people will not be able to feed themselves for long, keep themselves warm, even drink from the taps that are kept under constant electrically pumped pressure.

The mental burdens will also be intense for many. For those who spend their lives plugged into the mains, the loss of television, computer, telephone and even lighting will be unbearable. A hollowed-out existence in which the only veneer of life is driven by electricity seems like real life until the lights go out.

Politically, loss of power is suicide: the number one energy priority for Western governments is “security” – in other words, the need to maintain a continuous supply of power to every key part of the national infrastructure. What this really means is keeping a continuous supply of power to the economy – the money generating, trading and investing

entities that stretch across the industrial world have their entire memories stored on computer disks. When the computers crash, the markets crash, and take governments down with them.

As civilisations continue to become more energy intensive, and dependent on its continuous supply, the need to secure reliable energy sources becomes ever more critical. Interference with the electricity supply of most industrial nations is considered to be an act of terrorism, even if the intention of the protagonist is to highlight the dramatic changes happening to the climate as a result of its generation. Electricity dependency creates a state of fear: fear that is generated by those that want to keep the economy, and its suckling society from collapse, and fear that results from individuals' psychological need for artificial stimuli.

In effect, energy rich societies are under siege and, bizarrely, the attackers are those that perpetuate that energy dependence: the retailers, the advertisers, the property developers, those at the top of the heap that ride on the crest of a wave of wealth and political power. The wave is breaking, and the flotsam will be toxic for those who are in the water.

Those That Survive

In another home – a little place in the west of Scotland, in southern Nigeria, or perhaps in the south of France – a family is sitting around their wood burner, talking about the news that they picked up in the local bakery. Power cuts in the cities, darkness along the roads, civil unrest and a government that wants to crack down on dissent. Time to bring the chickens in, perhaps; the wolves could be coming to the door. There is still some oil in the lamps and stocks of candles, but at this time of the year bed time is soon after tea: as the body clock of each family member takes its cue from the darkness outside, they pump some water for teeth and a wash, then snuggle into bed, leaving the embers glowing.

A Last Toast to the Old World (Fiction, Perhaps)

We wanted to take the train, but the train wasn't there. "Cancelled Forever", someone had scrawled across the board that had once announced engineering works.

Walk? An epic journey south if we had no other choice; but the guy in the taxi was alive after all, just snoozing between rides. He admitted the sleeps had been getting longer, but could be persuaded to drive to Brighton for a bottle of sloe gin and some aged chocolate.

* * *

We drove into what could have once been any day in Anytown, except for the uncanny silence. Back in the Civilised Time the long hill between the railway station and the esplanade had shuddered with traffic: now, as we made our delicate way down the cracking asphalt it felt for the first time as though nature was winning through. Clumps of daisies poked up between paving slabs; buddleia loomed down from window sills, prising apart the cement, and turning the light-etched walls into a pretty purple picture. Clouds of insects were preyed upon by the birds that criss-crossed the chasm between the moss-dressed buildings.

We both stopped at the unlit traffic lights, more out of habit than anything else; there was still a part of me that urged a crowd of strangers to appear from out of some side street or emerge, laden with bags, from the now dusty and subdued shopping centre off to the right.

Of course we had to do the walk: the driver had given us an odd look when we asked him to drop us off at the station, but by that time the car had been running on air. He knew some "people" over in Kemptown who would be able to top him up again; we only knew that we had to retrace our steps for the last time.

Beyond that lay uniqueness.

* * *

You can do anything if you set your mind to it – cider in this case. Trees keep growing and apples keep falling: squeeze enough of them, let them sit for a while and . . . people used to drink cheap, refrigerated lager, and keep drinking it until they fought or fell down. There was a lot to get angry about, but eventually The Machine did most of the work itself; we just cut a few of the strings.

There's still plenty of plastic around, though – behind a door round the back of the Wetherspoons was an unopened pack of disposable tumblers. We took three, just in case, then crossed the road to the seafront and tumbled onto the beach.

* * *

We sit on the shingle as it breathes in the sea. Incoming: each wave is absorbed by the honeycombed voids between the grains . . . a second's embrace before the water seeps back into the sea.

Whoosh . . . shhhh . . . whoosh . . . shhhh . . .

Incessant but random. Sometimes a larger wave strikes the shore, rushing upwards, bestriding the hollows and touching the tips of our toes.

Tiny bubbles sparkle like glass beads rising up the sandy-yellow liquid in our cups. As they burst, minute puffs of moisture expand and settle down onto the surface of the cider, echoing the sea-froth at our feet.

We look at each other and push our cups together, gently buckling, and toast everything we left behind that was good. Through her tears I can't help but notice a glint, and then her face opens into a daylight smile.

"It's finished, isn't it? All the bad stuff."

"Probably," I reply.

* * *

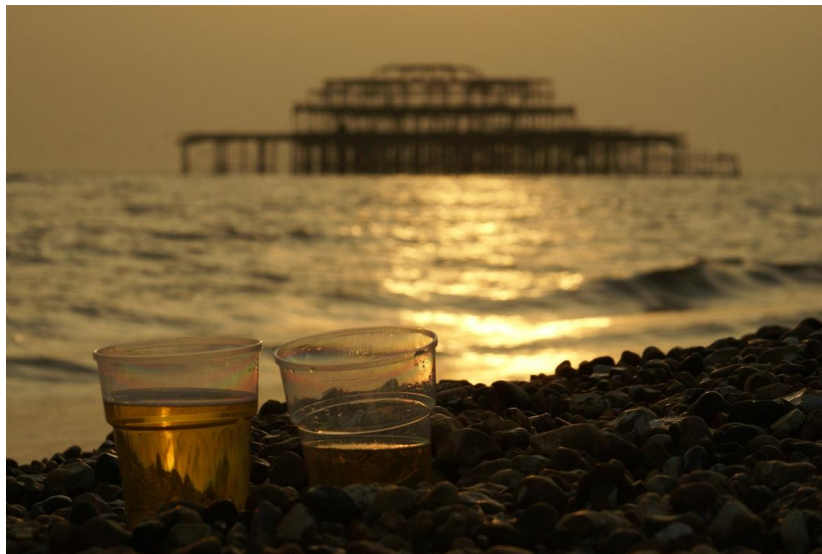
Did we deserve another chance? Perhaps not.

As we crunch our way towards Shoreham she points at the smokestack on the old coal-fired power station: idle. Dormant? Extinct?

The wind pushes some pebbles across our path, and in the sky the starlings shake their ephemeral blanket over the setting sun.

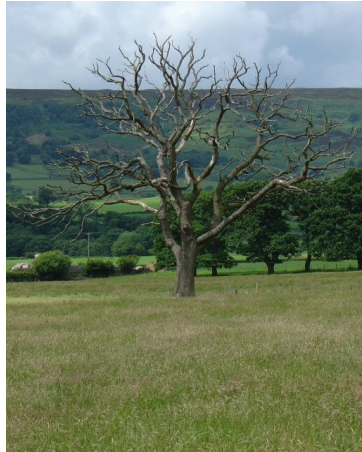
"Let's chase it," she says.

So we run.



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by Keith Farnish



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